

Hasan's victims, saluted in memorial, struggle to carry on

Fort Hood memorial unveiled

By Sig Christenson

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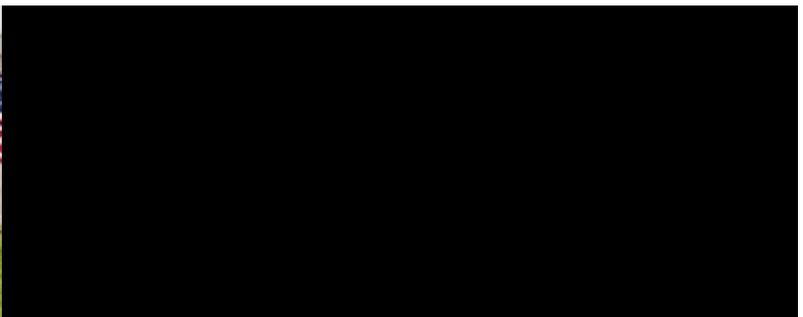
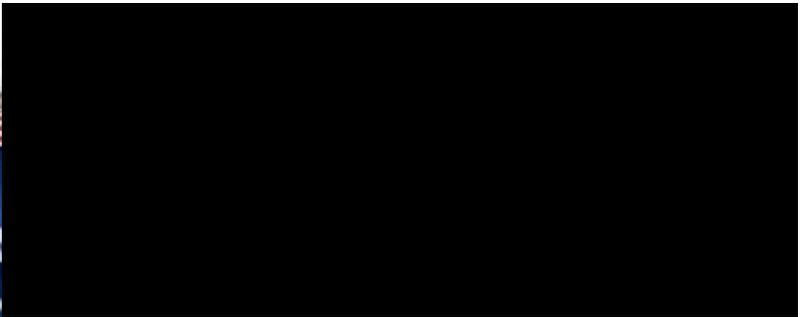
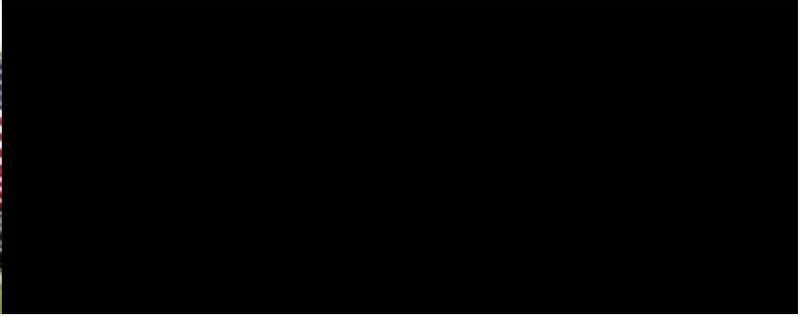


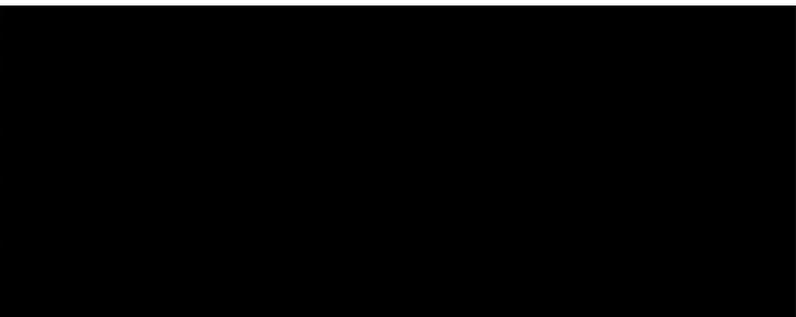
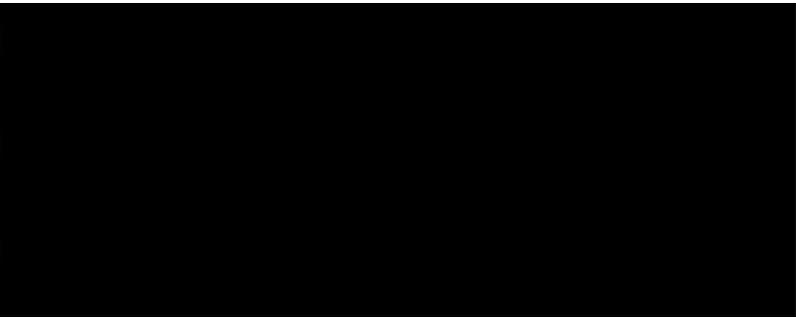
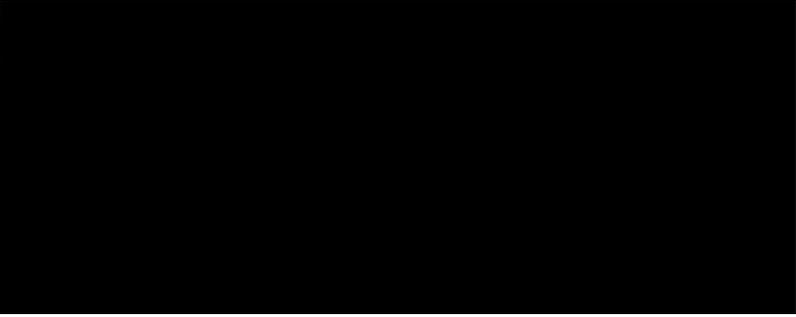




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KILLEEN — Surrounded by a sea of American flags, more than 750 well-wishers Friday marked the unveiling of a memorial to victims of the worst mass shooting ever on a military installation.

People in Killeen, a city whose fortunes have long been tied to the U.S. Army, saw the commemoration of the Nov. 5, 2009, ordeal as a symbol of their determination to overcome tragedy — and possible closure for the families of the 13 people killed that day.

But some of the survivors are doubtful about closure.

“I think this hit me harder than I thought it would. You kind of don’t expect it and then all of a sudden it gets closer,” retired Army Reserve Staff Sgt. Shawn Manning, who was shot six times, said before the ceremony.

“I have some good feelings. I mean, it’s a good thing for the memorial, but it kind of brings back some things I don’t want to think about,” he added. “I wish I could say I was doing a lot better.”

Now 40 and living in a rural area south of Seattle, Manning was among the 31 people wounded by Army psychiatrist Nidal Hasan, a radicalized Muslim who killed fellow soldiers with a handgun he bought at a gun store, fed by 20- and 30-round magazines.

Gov. Greg Abbott was on hand Friday to give Texas Purple Heart medals to Manning and 22 others. He read a proclamation and gave a challenge coin to Joleen Cahill, whose husband, Michael, was ineligible for the medal because he was a civilian. A retired Army chief warrant officer, Cahill, 62, was gunned down while charging Hasan.

The Army awarded Purple Hearts, for wounds suffered in combat, at a ceremony last year on Fort Hood after a long campaign led by Rep. John Carter, R-Round Rock.

“I want them to have closure,” he said this week. “I want them to be sure the Army doesn’t forget them.”

Alonzo Lunsford receives his Texas Purple Heart from Gov. Greg Abbott.
San Antonio Express-News



Now in a military prison awaiting execution, Hasan is mentioned on the memorial only as “an active-duty medical officer, dressed in his uniform and armed with a semi-automatic pistol with laser sights, a revolver and more than 300 specialty rounds of ammunition.” The memorial doesn’t name him.

“This memorial is about us: the fallen, the survivors, the families and who we were, who they were, what they embodied, their sacrifice,” Joleen Cahill said. “And it’s not about him,”

Sculptor Troy Kelley, a Vietnam veteran, said he began work on the monument six years ago. He worked on it in spurts while former Killeen Mayors Tim Hancock and Fred Latham led a fundraising group.

The group came up with \$421,000 plus in-kind contributions that included a roof. Hancock, who was mayor on “five-eleven” as the day of the shooting is called here, said the largest cash contribution was \$20,000, while the smallest was 86 cents raised by preschoolers.

“That meant as much to me as the largest donation we received,” he added.

The circular memorial rests in a field between a hotel and the Killeen Civic & Conference Center. Thirteen limestone columns support the roof and contain niches where a message, flower or candle can be left. Under the roof are 13 black granite pedestals that showcase bronzed objects unique to each of the dead.

Kelley, a retired Army Reserve lieutenant colonel, worked with the victims’ families to craft a personal symbol. For Pfc. Francheska Velez, who was 21 and pregnant when shot in the heart, he created her favorite object, a soft Scooby Doo she slept with, and made a baby Scooby Doo with two tears in its eyes and the letters BSD on a dog tag, for Baby Scooby Doo.

“The witnesses said her last words were, ‘My baby! My baby!’” Kelley, 76, of Salado said.

A black granite pyramid sits at the flagpole’s base. One panel tells the story, saying at the end, “When attacked at home, we did not falter. Civilian and Soldier together, we protected, we fought, and we healed.”

All of that is accurate, except the part about healing, some survivors say.

Three of them: Manning, Alonzo Lunsford and Kathy Platoni, say they and others remain deeply troubled. Cahill, 66, who lives in the Milam County seat of Cameron, offered a more upbeat assessment.

“The bulk of us are doing pretty good,” she said. “We all have our moments and we have our struggles.”

Lunsford still has a recurring dream of Hasan. The day he was shot, he sang “Amazing Grace” and “Get me back to green grass and pine trees,” a reference to his native North Carolina, before passing out. In the dream, the song is gone and Lunsford fights back.

“I want to say that it’s gotten worse than before. That’s why I try to stay so busy, so I won’t have to think about it. I try to put something else in its way,” explained Lunsford, 49, of Lillington, North Carolina.

If not for the shooting, he’d still be on active duty. He’s retired, with a 100 percent disability rating.

For Manning, there’s no escaping the damage Hasan did, starting with the bullet that’s still near his spine. Another ripped into his right lung and liver, a third hit his upper thigh and abdomen, and a fourth struck his thigh and slammed into his pelvis.



The fifth bullet hit his foot. The last grazed his right side. Manning and his wife moved to the country from their old home in Lacey, away from people, to the quiet of a forest.

“I don’t know of anybody who is doing horrible, but I know a lot of people who aren’t doing well, relationship-wise or personal-wise,” said Manning, who like others has had ongoing disputes with the government over care and compensation.

Cahill, a devout Catholic, thinks those who are more religious have found strength. Everyone has issues they wrestle with years later — in her case, forgiving Hasan — but there's reason for fresh starts, she said.

“You know a lot of bad things happen, a lot of things aren't fair. There's always something good out there,” she said.

Platoni, a retired Army Reserve psychology consultant from Beavercreek, Ohio, was going to be Hasan's boss in Afghanistan.

“PTSD is running rampant among those of us who were there. ...nightmares, flashbacks, anger, intrusive recollections,” said Platoni, who wasn't hurt but tended the wounded, one of them Capt. John P. Gaffaney, 56, shot while trying to tackle Hasan. He died at her feet.

“If you don't sit facing the door, you're always looking behind you. There is no safe place,” she said.